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Amused

Allison Gehlhaus

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Amused

Abstract

Excerpted from a memoir manuscript.

The unconquerable soul

This is their beginning. Not mine.



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November 4, 2011

Amused

by Allison Gehlhaus

Excerpted from a memoir manuscript.

The unconquerable soul

This is their beginning. Not mine.

She is young. She has long black hair, thick and coarse. She is a union organizer. It is the kind of day when the sun hangs low and illuminates the edges of things. It is autumn in 1967 in New York City. She strides into my father's classroom. I need to see her stride in because it says so much about who she is and why my father fell in love with her. I need her to fling open that wooden door carrying a clipboard and an attitude. He is in the middle of teaching a lesson about prepositions to sixth graders who don't care much about prepositions and probably suspect that my father doesn't either. He is amused by her boldness, her list of grievances, her righteousness. She wants him to sign something on the clipboard, a petition maybe, and urges him to join the other teachers on the picket line the next day. My father is amused because he is lucky to have a job. He is

lucky that he finally has custody of his kids. He is lucky that when he awoke that morning, he could put one foot down and then the other and that somehow he was walking. He cannot afford to go out on strike. She hands him the clipboard and the pen. He hesitates. She is ready for any resistance and begins to detail why he must. She is articulate and persuasive.

And these are the moments that change your life.

He tells her he will go on strike only if she agrees to meet him on the picket line. She looks him over, deciding. He is at least ten years older. Except for a thin wreath of salt and pepper hair, he is bald. She can't decide if his eyes are green or gold. His face is strong like it has just been carved from a tree trunk. She thinks he looks as if someone just plugged him in.

She says no.

She says yes.

The crisp light continues through the next day. A breeze blows in that is warm and cool at the same time, like it also can't make up its mind. They meet in front of the Board of Education building on 110 Livingston Street in Brooklyn. He is not surprised that she came. They are with hundreds of other angry teachers, yet they are alone. He is how she remembers him, only more so. She hands him a picket sign and she takes one for herself. The throngs of teachers are chanting, hoisting their signs up and down, walking in a long oval on the sidewalk. They slip into the line. She walks ahead of him. He is close enough to feel her hair blowing in his face.

He taps her on the shoulder and asks her to join him for a cigarette. They lean their signs against the building. My father takes out a pack from his shirt pocket and turns it upside down and flicks it twice on the bottom, causing the cigarettes to stagger out. He presents her with the pack and she takes one, not the one that is the tallest, but the next one. He does not take his eyes off her. With his unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth, he pats his pockets, first his shirt and then his pants, looking for matches. When he can't find any, they walk together to a drugstore. He is about to ask the clerk for a pack of matches but instead decides to buy a lighter. For her. It is shaped like a matchbox, made of brushed stainless steel with

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a top that flips open exposing a wheel that you spin with your thumb to get it to light. It has a sharp, acrid metal smell that lingers long after the flame goes out.

She still has it.

That night my father is on television. He rushes into the apartment, turns the channel, and lies down on his side on the floor of the living room. My brother and I retreat to the couch. We watch him watch the news. There are stories about the war, about a murder in the city, a burglary that had gone terribly wrong. My father jumps up and yells loud, loud, loud, "There I am!" And we see him, there in grainy black and white, carrying his sign. He looks grim, like he means it, like he wants the Board of Education to give him what he wants. I think they had better listen to him. He gets within inches of the screen and he whispers, "There she is." Or maybe I just want to remember it that way.

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Amused

Our beginning. Not theirs. Ours, not mine, because now that I am telling it, I cannot separate myself from him. We are a pair. I was seven years old when they met and Adam was five. When I am eighteen I am asked to write my own obituary for my first journalism class. I write that our mother passed away in the first line because it is the first thing anyone should know about us. The professor is handing back our papers, and pauses at my desk for a moment, like she wants to say something, but decides against it. She puts the paper down on my desk. She moves onto the next student. My paper is full of red marks. The words passed away are crossed out and died is written in red above them. So there it is. Our mother died.

My father begins to woo her. It does not occur to him that she will say no. I hear him late at night on the phone in the kitchen, murmuring and charming. She is interested but reluctant. She is enjoying her life in Manhattan and since she had just broken up with her fiancé, she was starting to date a lot. She tells her friends that my father is a lunatic. His self-confidence unnerves her. He has this troubling, insistent optimism. But in the way these things often work, the very attributes that flash warning lights in your head, begin to also attract you, and then ultimately become the very things that anger you the most and contribute to your ruin. Part of you always asking, why didn't I listen to myself?

We have moved from our apartment in north Jersey to a small, square brick rented house in Staten Island right off Watchung Avenue. The teacher's strike is over for now. Adam has started kindergarten and we all go on the school bus together to P.S. 30, my father standing in the aisle of the bus like a giant. The kids in school tell me to be on the lookout for escapees from Willowbrook Hospital. They tell me the crazies are locked up in there. On the weekends while my father sits on a bench reading the Times, and Adam is busy ruling the park, I am on the constant lookout for crazy people in hospital gowns carrying machetes. Even at five, Adam is the leader of any playground he is on – standing at the top of the slide, roaring like Gigantor, causing the kids to scatter like a flock of birds. The biggest boys try to imitate him and can't. He can go across the monkey bars with unparalleled speed. He stands on the edge of the spinning circle platform and jumps off and lands on his feet, flashing his grin at the rest of us still going around in circles.

During school, I try to navigate being a student where my father teaches. We have never been in the same school before. The kids are lining up in the gym after we get to school one morning and a boy cocks his head towards where the older kids are gathering. He whispers to me, "That's your father?"

I look over. The gym has gleaming wood floors with big squares of light coming in from the high windows above the bleachers. My dad is wearing a white- buttoned down shirt, open at the neck and dark pants. The other male teachers wear ties, but my father does not look like them. He looks like wrestler or a lion tamer. He is holding a white piece of paper and calling out kids' names. He has a deep voice, a radio voice. "Yeah," I say. "That's him."

He leans into me and says, "Well, everyone in his class hates him. My brother told me, he's in there. They are all scared of him. And besides," he says with a hiss, "He has a really big nose." I blink my eyes in stunned silence. I don't want my father's whole class to hate him. Or to be afraid of him. It makes me feel sick for him. I look around to see if anyone else heard him, afraid that my father will find out. I stare at this boy and wonder where he got such nerve. Doesn't he hear that my father comes with his own soundtrack? You can hear it before he even enters a room – it's a slightly jazzy off beat tune, a low insistent drumbeat, with an overlay

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of some finger snapping. The melody sounds like it threatens to get out of control but never quite does. This boy must be slightly crazy or else he'd see that my father should be exempt from the ridicule that all teachers deserve, based simply on the fact that he could break this kid in two. So I lean in towards him, look him in the eyes and say in the same menacing voice he used on me. "Shut the hell up or I'll tell the guy with the really big nose to beat the crap out you."

He rears back and takes that in.

And then he leaves me alone.

We are late for school almost every morning when my father doesn't have bus duty. My teacher is increasingly mad at me for this. I get detention. I have to sit at my desk after school after everyone leaves, with my arms clasped on top of my head as punishment.

"Why can't you get to school on time?" Miss Perillo asks, her back to me as she organizes her desk.

When I don't answer, she turns around, smooths her skirt, and stands with her hands on her hips. I do not want to give her the satisfaction of admitting that my arms are by now dead weights. I smile and say, "The mornings at our house are chaos."

"Chaos?" she says, her overly tweezed eyebrows arching like two crescent moons.

"Yes," I say. "We have one crisis after another."

"I see," she says, waiting a moment before adding, "Just because your father works here does not mean you don't have to follow the rules. The rules apply to everyone. Even your father."

My face burns with shame at this criticism of my father, but I do not want her to know, so I look away.

"Do you hear me?"

I refuse to look at her.

"You can just sit there like that until you decide to answer me."

I keep my lips zipped. I think about how angry my father will be because of the detention, because I've embarrassed him, because I am the cause of the crises of the mornings – spilling orange juice on my only clean dress, fighting with Adam, not getting up on time, not finding my homework. The mornings are chaos because we are on our own. We have lost yet another of the steady stream of older women my father hires to watch over us.

I sit there with my hands clasped on my head and think about how Adam and I are hard on these women. They are sometimes hard on us. Sometimes they don't appreciate our sense of humor. Most times they quit and my father has to find new ones.

I think about how I wouldn't be in detention if the last one didn't quit. My father is especially angry with us about this. He said she was one of the "good ones." I agreed. She was as wide as she was tall. She was missing more teeth than she had. I'd like to blame what we did to her on Adam but I can't be sure whose idea it was. We waited until she was in the shower one day. We put two small chairs out in the hallway opposite the bathroom door. We sat on the chairs and yelled, "Fire!" as loud as we could. She burst out of the room, naked and wet, her hair a halo of shampoo bubbles, trying to pull a small bath towel around her body, and she ran towards the front door. We clapped. We gave her a standing ovation. We cheered like she just won the World Series. She stopped and turned, her body white and doughy, her hair dripping rivers onto her shoulders. She looked at the chairs and then to us. We watched as her face slowly changed to disbelief. She looked stung with disappointment. I wanted to feel worse about this than I did. She had to pass us on her way back to the bathroom. She wouldn't even look at us. Adam said to her "Were you even going to try to save us?" His unanswered question just hung in the air.

I keep my eyes on the blackboard. Our math lesson is still on it. It is all about measurements. I study them.

Twelve inches in a foot. Three feet in a yard. 5280 feet in a mile. 1760 yards to a mile.

I see Miss Perillo making herself busy in the classroom. She keeps glancing at me to see if I am ready to give up. It is going to take way more than two dead arms to make me answer her.

“Allison,” I hear my father calling for me. “Let’s go. I’ve been waiting for you.” I do not answer him either.

“May I speak with you out in the hall for a moment,” Miss Perillo says, marching towards the door.

My arms hurt so much that I just wish she would be quick about telling my him how mad she is at me.

Eight ounces in a cup. Two cups in a pint. Two pints in a quart.

I hear them talking.

“Take your hands off of your head,” my father calls to me.

Four quarts in a gallon.

Miss Perillo is raising her voice, talking faster and louder.

“Get your things,” my father says.

I put on my coat, gather my schoolbooks and slip past them into the hall. I wait by the stairs for him because they are still talking.

My father does not say a word about the detention. Miss Perillo does not make me stay after school anymore. I close my eyes the next day and remember the lesson on the blackboard. I get 100% on my math test.

The teacher will not agree to go out with him. Two weeks pass. He starts to mail her letters. He writes them on white lined paper from school. They are long letters, or short ones. I am not sure. He talks about us in them. Tells her amusing stories about us. Or not. He talks about when he was a Marine, when he fought in the Korean War, about his family that has been of no help to him. Or not. I do know he does not write about our mother. She never happened.

He sends her a poem.

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever god may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley 1849-1903

And this does it. She agrees to see him. The bloody, unbowed head is
always irresistible.

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ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

Amused

Trying not to judge

We drive into the city in late October. We have to clean out the car first. And brush our teeth and hair. “You will not fight with each other today,” my father says. This is a variation of his “You will be kind” or my personal favorite, “You will be happy,” as though by the force of his will, he could make us be something we are not.

He drives an old pale blue Ford Falcon station wagon. There are no seat belts. We pass through a tollbooth and I lean in behind him and stick my head out of his window to watch him toss the money into the basket. I love to watch him throw the jumble of change while the car is still moving. He has quick hands and he doesn’t even have to look at the basket. He pulls away and cranks the window closed. Except he doesn’t realize that he has closed the window on my neck. As unbelievable as this would be for most fathers, it is completely believable for mine. I don’t panic at first thinking that it will momentary. Surely my father will see my head outside the car as he is driving. Adam makes no attempt to help. I imagine that he finds this funny. I can’t kick him anymore because I think I could die. My father is speeding across the Verrazano into Manhattan. He is unaware that my head is outside the car and my body is inside. I imagine Adam laughing. He changes lanes. Every time I move my arms

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my neck hurts even more. I begin to punch his seat. My father ignores the punching, probably thinking we are just fighting. Business as usual. The wind is causing a riot on my face and hair. I worry that if my head is still outside the car when we pass through another toll that my head will get crushed. I reach for my father, twisting and trying to touch him the best I can. This too he ignores. I try to yell. It comes out as a gurgle. I picture Adam in hysteria over my dilemma. I hate him. I punch my father in his head as hard as I can. He turns around, towards Adam, who must just point in my direction.

“Jesus K. Rist,” he yells. “What the hell?”

He cranks the window open, releasing me. I fall into the backseat. Adam kicks me.

“Are you crazy?” my father yells at me. This will not be the last time he asks me this.

I want to say that he was the one who closed the window. On my neck no less. But I know better than to accuse him of even the obvious. So I just stare at his eyes darting back at me in his rearview mirror.

“Jesus. You’re impossible,” he says.

Class dismissed.

We drive the rest of the way in silence. My father does not tell us where we are going. I rub my neck and glare at Adam. Manhattan is crowded. It is a symphony of honking horns. My father curses at the drivers who cut him off. “Son. Of. A. Bitch.” We open all the windows because we are stuck in traffic and let the smells of the city in. It is like all the smells you could ever smell, concentrated and released – metal, exhaust, Chinese food, buildings, people. We cannot move through an intersection because there are so many cars. My father looks at his watch and pounds his fist down, quick, once, on the dashboard and says this is gridlock. The car behind us honks. He leans out of his window and turns to the driver and yells, “Where would you like me to go?” Then to us, “Maybe he thinks the car can grow wings and fly.”

“Yeah, mister,” Adam sticks his head out of the window and yells to the

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man. "What do you think? We can fly?"

I close my eyes for a second and imagine how it would feel to be flying in a car with wings.

Adam sits back in his seat and raises his eyebrows at me, proud of himself. I roll my eyes at him. He then points at a man on the sidewalk under a tent of cardboard. I look over. The man has an old plaid shirt on and his dark whiskers look like ants against his pale skin. He is sitting cross-legged and in the nook where his ankles meet there is a white enamel bowl. People are walking by him like he is invisible. Adam must feel emboldened by his encounter with the honker because he leans out the window again and yells, "What a bum."

"Don't point. Don't call him a bum," my father says.

"But look." Adam is still hanging out of the open window, his chin resting on the doorframe. The man and my brother are staring at each other. I move over to the window to watch. The man has glassy, wounded eyes. He looks defiant and sad, like he's daring Adam to say something but tired of thinking that he will.

"Leave him alone," my father says.

"But he's sitting there waiting for people to give him money. Right in the middle of the sidewalk."

"Stop."

"He needs a bath." Adam, as usual, does not know when to stop.

My father puts his arm on the seat and twists around and looks Adam in the face and says again, "Stop."

He turns to face forward again and says softly. "Things aren't always so simple."

He sounds so tired.

"Maybe he lost his job, or got sick. And then he couldn't pay his rent. Or

he has no one to help him.” ^{Gehlhaus: Amused} We finally start to move. Adam is still watching the man as we drive away. “There can a lot of reasons why this man ended up on the sidewalk. None of them his fault. You can’t judge. You just can’t.”

We let the weight of this man’s predicament enter the back seat of the car. I feel vaguely guilty even though I was not the one who made fun of him. Adam looks properly chastened.

We are on the Lower East Side. The sidewalks are jammed up with people. There are men in prayer shawls weaving their way through the crowds with stainless steel racks of full of clothes. We drive down a long avenue and my father is craning his neck looking towards the sidewalk. I wonder what he is looking for.

“Where are we going?” I ask him.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll find out soon enough,” he says.

There are a lot of clothing stores here but I am pretty sure he is not taking us shopping. We could fight if we were only going shopping. I look at the park we are passing – this one more has more concrete than grass. Some older men are hunched over playing chess in a long line along the fence. Some older women are walking dogs smaller than their pocketbooks. There are some teenagers sitting on the metal bicycle racks laughing with each other. My father is still obviously looking for something. In amongst all the commotion there is one woman standing still.

“There. There she is,” my father says.

We don’t ask who she is. We have learned not to question him too much. We will find out soon enough.

I watch her. She is serene, not at all like someone who has been kept waiting but more like a person who is sure that someone is coming for her. She is lovely.

My father manages to pull the car over. The woman and my father are smiling at each other. No, smiling isn’t big enough a word. They are beaming, shafts of light are pouring down upon them, they are the only

two people on the planet, and they are full to the brim with joy. She walks over to the curb and puts her forearms down on the passenger side open window. We can't really see the whole of her face because she is wearing sunglasses, tortoise shell with round lenses like two suns. Adam pokes me in the leg and gives me a puzzled look. I shrug and keep my eyes on them.

"Traffic," my dad says.

She nods that it is okay. She is wearing a thick woolen sweater. It is mostly beige. There are thin blue strands of yarn woven through it. She slides into the front seat and pushes her sunglasses up onto her head. My father sweeps his arm towards the back seat and says, "Here's the kids."

She says, "I recognize them from the picture."

Adam's eyes open wide as he turns to look at me. I wonder which photograph my father has shown her. I guess it is the one taken at Sears: Adam sitting in front of me, my hands on his shoulders. Instead of looking into the camera, we are staring off to the side as if there was some prize dangling just left of the camera lens. We look happy, not just happy, but beaming. There is not enough room in my mouth for all my teeth. Adam has dirty blonde hair and a wicked smile. I am the plainer version of my beautiful brother.

She doesn't turn around to talk to us. The others always did. Singsong voices like we were babies. She stares straight ahead like she has got to watch where my father is driving. Her hair is hanging over the back seat. It is swinging like windshield wipers. Adam is staring at it.

The inquisition begins. I lay my head down sideways on the front seat and start.

"You have nice hair."

"Why is it so long?"

"How old are you?"

"Do you have a dog?"

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“Are you going to be our new mother?”

I’ve asked this before, although my father doesn’t like me to. I like getting to the point, though.

My father groans and shakes his head.

She doesn’t answer. She is still making sure my father is driving right.

We began to see a lot of her. She came late at night and they stayed in my father’s bedroom. I wanted to like her. I think she wanted to like us. And although I like to think we welcomed her, I cannot be sure. It could not have been easy for her. I see that now, but I did not see it then. She slowly began to seem as brittle to me as the pages in my father’s old books. Which came first – her hesitation or mine? I truly do not know. Maybe it was mutual, maybe no one could have filled the emptiness, maybe it was unfair of me to expect and need her to, maybe the sheer enormity of my desire doomed her. I believe that she tried to love us in her own way. She was not one of those women for whom being with children is as natural as taking a breath, their bodies meld with them, they run their fingers absentmindedly through their hair, kiss the tops of their heads just to inhale their scents. She simply was not. I’ve wondered if this because we weren’t hers, although I see adoptive mothers hold their children as though they birthed them, there is no difference for some. Is it the nature of the woman and not the circumstance? Perhaps it is useless to speculate, but the questions have since caused me to spend a lot of time watching mothers with their daughters. I think of it as my part time job. I watch the small moments of connection, moments they are so accustomed to having they don’t even know they are having them. The sweeping of stray hair out of eyes, the squeezing of a hand in the supermarket, the way they look at their daughters like they are full of grace, and they are blessed to know them. These moments make my arms ache.



ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

Amused

*Reason #37 why it is a bad idea to leave your potential stepdaughter alone
with your mother*

Adam and I share a room, down the hall from my father's. He wants us to be quiet when she comes over. We don't do quiet well. We sleep on opposite sides of the room. Adam's bed fits in a nook created by a closet and wall and this makes me wild with jealousy. My bed, in contrast, is out in the open, right under a picture window where any robber or escaped lunatic can get me. I keep a flashlight under my pillow and a book so that after my father turns the light off, I can read under the covers. Adam doesn't read. He jumps up and down on his bed and throws his army men at me. He hits me in the head with his pillow. I hit him with mine. We are quietly beating the crap out of each other with our pillows when my father comes in and yells at us to go to sleep. "God. Damn. It." We listen as he goes back down the hall and then Adam hits me in the head with a truck. Then we start wrestling again. I usually get the best of him because I am bigger and not afraid to fight dirty. This will change.

On the nights that she is there, my father comes in our room and scoops us up, one at a time, and lays us in the back seat of the station wagon. We are wrapped in the blankets from our beds. I wake up off and on as we drive her back into the city. These are long, dreamy drives that if I close

my eyes I can still be in that back seat – my legs tangled up with Adam’s, the cool night air flowing through the car smelling of the end of autumn, the car moving smoothly, more boat than car, gliding, magically erasing any bumps in the road. And there are stars, thousands of them, in the sky, ahead of us, behind us and in front of us. Even underneath us. I hear them talking in the front seat but not what they are saying. I really don’t want to hear their words because their voices sound like music from the radio. The rides back home are silent.

Within weeks she takes us to meet her family. The stairs to her apartment are white and gray marble worn down in two trails all the way up the five flights from so many feet. We can hear the lives going on in some of the apartments we pass by – dogs barking, televisions blaring, kids yelling.

She opens the door like a TV game show hostess revealing a dark foyer with four anxious people.

“This is my mother, my younger sister, my brother Ira, and,” she pauses, like the big prize is being announced, “my grandmother.” There is a lot of fussing, hair ruffling, and hand shaking. I realize that they must have already met my father because they are not as happy to see him as they are to see us. Ira shows us around. The grandmother’s room looks tiny but heavenly. It is painted a pale blue and has two tall windows that let in the palest blue light. The parents have their own dark room that looks out over an ocean of brick. Her sister is sitting on the couch in the living room reading a magazine. She has shorter hair than her sister but it is just as thick and pretty. She frowns all the time, like everything in her life is a disappointment. Ira is her opposite. He smiles a lot and looks us right in the eyes when he talks to us. He has long arms and legs and a large nose that looks somehow perfect on his face. I think he looks like he doesn’t belong in that apartment. “Where is your room?” I ask him.

“We sleep in here,” he says pointing to the living room. “I have the couch and my sisters have the pull-out.”

I nod but think that although I have always shared a room with Adam at least we sleep in real beds, not couches. I am trying not to judge.

A clock on the wall looks like the sun, wooden dowels radiating in alternating lengths from the center. There are two big windows in the

living room that look out over the street corner that we first met her on. Everything looks brown and gold and tired.

She and my father leave us in the apartment and they go out on their own.

Adam and I wander into the kitchen. The mother is cooking. She is wearing a sturdy floral dress and gold-rimmed glasses. It is a long narrow space, with a table at the far end near a window that also looks out over the park. The floor has white hexagon shaped tiles, dull with wear, arranged in a daisy pattern with a single black tile in each center. The kitchen smells like wet, dead bodies.

“What stinks?” Adam asks, pinching his nose shut.

“Liver,” the mother says. “I’m making Molly her dinner.” She looks down at a small dog, black with white spots, or white with black spots depending on how you looked at her. She is sitting at the mother’s feet waiting for the liver. I can’t wait for her to eat it too so the smell will be gone. I choose a seat closest to the window. It is open a crack and I breathe in the fresh air, waiting. There are flowerpots on the windowsill. They have silverware shoved into the dirt. This really gets Adam. “Why do you guys have knives and forks in your plants?”

“Because we’re kosher. And someone used them for dairy when they should’ve only be used for meat. This cleans them so we can use them again.”

“You put them in dirt to clean them?” He is laughing now.

But the mother is patient and describes how the silverware is contaminated and it is a symbolic gesture to clean them in the dirt. She explains Judaism – how some people keep kosher, some are conservative, some orthodox, and some are Hasidic like the men we saw wheeling the garment racks on the street.

“We go to church,” I tell her. “Not all the time though.”

She nods like this does not surprise her.

“My father says most religious people are hypocrites. They fight in the

church parking lots or something like that.”^{Gehlhaus: Amused}

She snorts and keeps stirring.

“He talks about Jesus all the time. It’s always Jesus Christ this or Jesus Christ that.”

“But your Dad’s family is Jewish,” she says.

“Are they? They don’t put forks and knives in plants.”

“You don’t have to do that be Jewish,” she says.

“When the kids in school ask me I tell them we are Agnostics. Dad says that will shut them up.”

She looks at me like she is trying to open me up, like I am what my father says about me, a hard nut to crack. I don’t think he means it as a compliment because he says it when he is angry with me, when I give him a hard time.

When she is done cooking the liver, she puts it on a wooden board and cuts it up into little squares and puts in a real cereal bowl, and gives it to the dog, patting it on the head. She then cooks for everyone in the apartment, one at a time. They all eat something different and none of it looks good. Ira comes in with his hair wet and slicked back, wearing a black leather jacket. He says good night. I fall a little in love with him.

The grandmother waddles in. She looks like her daughter except she is softer and wider. Her eyes crinkle like everything we say and do is hilarious and special. She has white hair like cotton candy. We have to speak loudly so she can hear. The mother is finally done with the cooking and can sit down at the table. We can hear the cars outside still honking. Music is playing from the teenagers’ radios in the park.

They start to tell us who they are. Adam goes under the table to play with the dog that has finished its liver. The mother is a secretary in a company. Shamoon Industries. I remember the name because we had pads of white paper with that name in bold black letters on them for many years. The grandmother has had seven children. Five girls and two boys. The mother

is the youngest daughter. They tell us how the grandmother was a co-founder of the Henry Street Settlement. They tell us about the work she did there, helping the immigrants. The grandmother seems not to be of this earth, maybe because she is so old and cannot hear so well, maybe because of the stories they tell me about her goodness make me think that when she dies, which looks like it can be any minute, she will fly like a rocket right up to the gates of heaven where God will open the door and let her walk right in. No questions asked.

The mood in the apartment changes when the teacher's father comes home – like we were having a party and then we were not. He is tall and thin with a face like a hound dog that always looks sad even when he smiles. The mother takes a deep, hard breath when she sees him and gets up to make him dinner too. He says he works at a liquor store. I ask him about robbers. I always worry about robbers. He says he has run into his fair share of robbers. He has a gun under the counter. Adam hears this and sits at the table again. “A gun?” he asks. “How big?”

The father holds up his hands and puts his palms about a foot apart.

“Did you ever shoot anyone?” Adam says, like he is hoping that he had.

“I pointed it at someone once,” he says, shaking his head, “but I never had to use it.”

“Why not?” Adam asks.

“I give them what they want,” he says.

They are still not back.

The mother says it is bath time. Adam goes first. He comes out wild and cleaner. He sits, bounces, on the couch and watches television with the father. It is my turn.

The mother sits on the edge of the toilet and turns on the bath water. The bathroom is small so her knees touch the edge of the tub. She rests her elbows on them and her chin fits in one of her upturned palms. She looks tired from all that cooking. I wash my hair. I wash my entire body. I answer all her questions. I know somehow I am doing something wrong by

answering all her questions but it feels so good to tell her our story that I can't help myself. Even then as I tell her it sounds like a book I read under the covers, or a dream that happened to other kids. I am giddy with the revelations. I sense that she also knows that somehow she shouldn't be asking me all these questions that lead to other questions that lead to other questions but she can't help herself, either. None of my stories make her happy. I tell her about the other one and her daughter and how mean they were, how happy I was when they left. But sad too cause somehow having a bad mother might be better than having no mother. You just don't know. I tell her how my father left us for a really long time with another family. I tell her about my father's mother who is no help to my father but I love because I believe that she loves me too. I am careful to tell her only the highlights. I don't want to bore her. I tell her the story much like I am doing now, backwards and forwards, because that is how we reveal ourselves.

About five years later, she says, "My parents were none too thrilled about you spilling the beans."

"What beans?" I ask.

"We weren't, we decided not to tell them all of it."

She says this without anger at me, which surprises me because by then I am a problem, the thorn in her side, the pea under the mattress.

"Until later," she adds. "We would have told them later."

I guess when choosing to tell his own story my father also didn't want to bore them with the details. I had become bitter towards my father by then and ungenerous.

"My parents were furious," she says in the way you do when you still feel bad about things. "Your dad tried everything to win them over. He used to go pick up my father from the liquor store and drive him home so he wouldn't have to take the subway."

"What did your dad say, did he yell at my dad?"

"No, all he kept saying was, 'I don't see it, I don't see it.'"

Until then, I hadn't seen her as someone's treasured daughter, with desires to please and piss her parents off simultaneously. Just like me. I guess we all tell our stories like myths – and they understood, as did I, that getting involved with a widower with two small kids can be one kind of sweet story, but getting involved with a widower with two small kids, who left his kids with a co-worker and also had a flaming brief marriage to someone else, changes the story and adds some question marks.

She tells me how my father had to come over and sit at the kitchen table and explain his past to her parents. How he had to come clean. Just like I came clean. I try to picture my father sitting at the table in that long, narrow kitchen trying to explain the lies of omission. I can't though because nothing is ever his fault, he is not good at apologizing, because he cannot speak about my mother. The words cannot come out of his mouth.

I want to tell her that I wasn't trying to sabotage their beginning because by then there is so much that she is angry with me about. I want to say that questions were asked and then answered. But that is not true and I know it. Things are not always so simple. I knew what her mother wanted and I gave her it. We used each other. I had a story she wanted to hear. Her gift to me was that she let me tell it.

When Allison Gehlhaus is not driving, cooking or doing laundry for her five kids, she works at her husband's amusement park on the Jersey Shore. And she writes. She is grateful for her many trips to the Sirenland Writer's Conference for this. Until now, her work has only appeared on her laptop. This excerpt is from her memoir, House of Mirrors.

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